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ABSTRACT

In his book, "Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding," Gerald L. Bruns interprets the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer. Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. One principle of hermeneutics is that understanding always proceeds from an initializing moment of confusion, strangeness, darkness, or concealment. Concealment's opposite is clarity, and, while a repeated direction to composition students is "make it clear," experience is not always clear, nor is language. If composition courses are predicated upon the "make it clear" motto, dimensions of language and experience basic to the very reason for composition are concealed from students. In composition courses, the most vital work comes in helping students to understand that meaning is always a compensation for what is inaccessible and in encouraging them to have reverence for concealment, which is not deceit nor obscurity, but the very condition which keeps individuals thinking and writing and trying to compose accounts for themselves and others--explaining why, how, and what it means to be here and to be human. (CR)

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Concealment in Composition: Radical Omission Or Integral Part?

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In his book ***INVENTIONS: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History***, Gerald L. Bruns says the following: "Meaning is always a compensation for the inaccessible. . . . Hence the interpreter's reverence for concealment, for he knows that . . . concealment is not deceit or blank obscurity but an enabling condition, that which draws us near. . . . Remove the hidden and you are left with a blank stare on your face" [6].

Hermeneutics, from the Greek, is the art of interpretation. Gerald Bruns is one of the best interpreters of the hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer. One of the basic principles of Gadamer's and Bruns's hermeneutics is that understanding always proceeds from an initializing moment of *confusion, strangeness, darkness, or concealment*.

When Bruns remarks, "Remove the hidden and you are left with a blank stare on your face," he refers us to a kind of experience we have, perhaps, all too often: that is times when there are no differences, when we know that we know the familiar world, and nothing comes forward to challenge or to say **NO!** to our assumptions. Life is not very interesting when we are full of our own knowledge.

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Gadamer takes the following position in his most important work, ***Truth And Method***

> ***[T]he perfect form of what we call 'experience', does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. . . . The dialectic of experience has its own fulfillment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.***
>
> ***That experience refers chiefly to painful and disagreeable experiences does not mean that we are being especially pessimistic. . . . Only through negative instances do we acquire new experiences. . . . Every experience worthy of the name runs counter to our expectation. Thus the historical nature of man contains as an essential element a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight [319].***

When we experience negative instances as Gadamer has in mind, we are confronted by darkness. What is concealed is our sense of belongingness and ease and habitude. It is easy to retreat to the ground we know; however, all of us in this room anyway have been trained to expect such moments of negativity and to begin to ask questions about the situations we find ourselves in. According to Gadamer and Bruns, out of our questions emerge new situations, constituted by that which is concealed or strange and that which we find ourselves able to say about whatever it is that is strange. A first step might be to say that we have nothing to say. While we never find ways to disclose all that is concealed, gradually at least we do find ways to make some kind of sense. We accommodate ourselves to the strangeness, using whatever resources--primarily language resources--that we have brought along with us.

But what does any of this have to do with our work in composition?

Concealment's opposite is clarity. I say it myself, and I say it repetitively, "***Make it clear!*** I do not understand what you're driving at here. This is murky. You've got a lot embedded in this. Unpack it!"

But if in the day to day business of teaching I systematically refuse to acknowledge concealment or darkness or strangeness in the presence of my composition students, insisting ever and always on clarity, all the while chanting **Make it clear!**, I'm teaching a path-way to neurosis: because experience is not always clear; because language is not always clear; because, and we all know this, composition is a process where we position ourselves toward experience and try to understand the same. And we do not begin, or it is hardly worth beginning, if we begin from positions vested in what we might wish to pass for absolute understanding.

If our composition courses are predicated in the first place and the last upon the ***Make it clear!*** motto, we are concealing from students dimensions of language and experience which are basic to the very reason for composition. Nothing needs composition where everything is clear or where everything is composed. Of course, I'm simplifying things.

My excuse is the time. My excuse is the language I am speaking, the strangeness inherent in sitting here, appearing before you, as it were, out of nothing and nowhere, and taking part with you in. . . What?

Were it not for the phenomenon of concealment in experience and in language—in our daily lives—we would not need composition classes. One grammar course would be enough: just enough to teach students how to erect the fences and how to herd in and how to count the already domesticated beasts.

Why are student essays so often dead on their pages? Maybe it is because their topics are clear. And maybe it is because their essays are clear, such essays as mirror blank stares on students' faces, such essays as are written by smart people who have learned what it means *to go to college or university*. They know how to be clear, having learned that clarity pays premiums. This clarity refuses to risk acknowledgment of what is hidden, even when everyone knows [Why not a little hyberbole?] that everything that really matters is hidden.

In composition courses our most vital work comes in helping students to understand that meaning is always a compensation for what is inaccessible and in encouraging them to have reverence for concealment, which is not deceit or obscurity but the very condition which keeps us thinking and writing and trying to compose accounts for

ourselves and for others, accounts which help to explain why and how and what it means to be here and to be human.

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